

Japan's Role As The World's Leading Importer Of Live Tortoises And Freshwater Turtles As Pets Needs Assessing, Conservationists Say

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Some wild tortoise and freshwater turtle populations in Asia could be threatened by trade supplying for a vast demand for pets in Japan, says TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network. Japan is the largest importer of live tortoises as pets in the world. According to a new report released today, Japan's impact needs urgent assessment to ensure that this trade does not threaten the survival of a number of these species. This is critical, especially since over half of the Asian tortoises and freshwater turtles are already considered threatened as a result of consumption for food and use in traditional medicines according to IUCN-The World Conservation Union.

TRAFFIC East Asia-Japan report titled Japan's Trade in Live tortoises and Freshwater Turtles as Pets found that over a quarter of a million live tortoises and freshwater turtles were imported to the country between 1981 and 2001. In the early 1980s some 2000 individuals were imported each year, and since then imports have continued to increase reaching 37 000 in 2001. Imports of CITES- listed tortoises and freshwater turtles have also increased dramatically over the same period.

TRAFFIC surveys found a total of 68 CITES* listed tortoise and freshwater turtle species for sale in pet shops in Japan. "Most of these are CITES Appendix-II listed species, meaning that more than 160 countries must ensure that commercial trade is not detrimental to wild populations," said Hisako Kiyono from TRAFFIC East Asia-Japan office and a co-author of the report. "Prices of the live tortoises and freshwater turtles we found on sale varied from 166 to over 20 000 US dollars, and the most expensive individual found was a CITES Appendix-II listed (albino) Indian Star Tortoise."

A high number of seizures in recent times also indicate that Japan is a major end market for smuggled freshwater turtles and tortoises with specimens originating mostly from other countries in Asia, especially from the Southeast Asia region. For example, a shipment of CITES Appendix-II listed Malayan Box Turtles destined from Indonesia were seized at the Kansai Airport in 2002 as was a shipment of highly endangered CITES Appendix-I listed Black Pond Turtles in 2004 en route from Thailand.

"Despite frequent seizures made, adequate customs data is still lacking to fully understand Japan's impact on wild populations and more information is needed in order to assess the overall situation accurately," Kiyono said. "In addition, border controls need to be strengthened to prevent illegal trade and Japan's Customs service needs more resources urgently as it is poorly equipped to identify species in trade."

TRAFFIC hopes that recommendations made in the report will support efforts to strengthen regulatory and legislative framework in place protecting live tortoises and freshwater turtles in Japan. To this end, TRAFFIC East Asia-Japan has delivered the report and a petition to the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Economics, Technology and Industry.

More effective regulation of domestic collection of and trade in tortoises and freshwater turtles in the Asian range States is also needed. "The communication channels between the authorities in Japan and Asian range States need to be improved to support better the efforts aimed at confirming the legality of the on-going trade and tracking down illegal sources of supply of these species," Kiyono said.

The TRAFFIC report also calls for vigilance by consumers. "Reptile and pet enthusiasts should always ask about the legal provenance of an animal before purchasing. Buyers of illegally supplied species are contributing to the threats, and even the demise, of wild populations. In fact,

irresponsible purchasing is the engine that drives both the illegal harvest and the trade," Kiyono concluded.

The full report entitled Japan's Trade in Live Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles as Pets (in Japanese) can be downloaded from TRAFFIC East Asia-Japan website <http://www.trafficj.org> for the English language summary <http://www.traffic.org/news/press-releases/JapanLiveTurtle-050304.pdf>

The report investigates the trade of live freshwater turtles and tortoises as pets in Japan, describes the domestic control system for this trade and recommends action to ensure this trade is legal and sustainable. The report is based on surveys of pet shops carried out in March 2002 as well as review of data from Japan's government agencies.

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